

# A BIOPOLITICAL DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF THE SHELTERED WORKSHOPS WITH REFERENCE TO DAVID FREEMAN'S PLAY *CREEPS*

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper attempts to study the effectiveness of sheltered workshops in the light of the experiences of people with disabilities. While the concept of sheltered workshop aims at transforming the 'zoe' of the disabled person, the purpose is not fully met. The dichotomy between what the sheltered workshops intended to do and what they turned out to be is very striking. Instead of elevating the people with disabilities to a state of 'bios', the sheltered workshops resulted in the creation of a group of 'homosacers' who were forced to sacrifice their passions for a monotonous work.*

*The play Creeps by David Freeman belongs to the subgenre Disability Theatre. The play is set in a sheltered workshop for victims of cerebral palsy, where they are expected to contribute to the economy of the country through their labour at their own pace. Even though from the point of view of the able-bodied-society, it is a privilege to the disabled; from the point of view of the disabled, it is only an exercise of power on them. Some of them want to be artists, but they are considered unworthy of any other art other than packing and folding boxes. The dichotomy between what the Cerebral Palsy victims want to do and what they are doing now creates their sense of an 'unworthy self'. The paper focuses on the able/disable power relations in the context of sheltered workshops and how they continue to socially disable these physically impaired people. It also looks at how these Cerebral Palsy victims take revenge on the able-bodied supervisors by using abusive language.*

**KEYWORDS:** Disability, Sheltered Workshops, Cerebral Palsy & Able/Disable Power Relations

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## INTRODUCTION

The social stigma associated with disability is deeply rooted in the minds of people. Euphemisms like differently abled, physically challenged, mentally challenged are different names by which the society covers up this social stigma. Discourses on the inclusion of the disabled into the mainstream are being carried out in diverse arenas. Sheltered workshops have been formed with this objective of inclusion. This paper critically questions the success of these institutions and how they have negatively affected the people with disabilities, with regard to David Freeman's play *Creeps*. The tools of deconstruction, Foucault's Biopolitics and Agamben's concept of the 'homosacer' are used for this study.

## Sheltered Workshops

Sheltered workshops are organizations or institutions that employ people with disabilities separately, so that they can work at their own pace. They emerged in the United States almost hundred years ago, as an extension

of the special schools that train the people with impairments in a special vocation. The Department of Labour in the United States defines sheltered workshops as,

rehabilitation facilities with a controlled work environment in which handicapped persons are provided training and employment services designed to assist them in moving toward an optimum level of vocational and social functioning. Workshop programs are structured to accommodate the physical or mental impairment of the individual and to permit them to work at their own productive capacity and be paid accordingly" (Whitehead 273).

Ideally, this setting involves an adaptive working condition designed to suit the needs of the physically or mentally impaired individuals. Claude W. Whitehead in his article "Sheltered Workshops – Effective Accommodation or Exploitation" traces the history of such initiatives. The first workshop, established to provide occupation for blind persons, was systematized in 1838 at the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Massachusetts. Earlier workshops were established and operated primarily with private funds provided through churches and quasi-religious organizations. Most of the initial workshops offered sheltered employment for physically handicapped persons, aged persons and alcoholics. On the other hand, persons with mental or emotional disabilities received very little attention until the 1960s. Nowadays, the handicapped population in workshops has shifted from mostly physically handicapped persons to a balance between physically handicapped and mentally impaired persons in the sixties. Whitehead in his article says that the evolving policies provide a hope for the effective accommodation of the disabled people in sheltered workshops.

The play *Creeps*, which is selected for the study, belongs to the subgenre Disability Theatre, a theatre which is scripted, acted and produced by artists with disabilities. *Creeps* is set in 1960s in the washroom of a sheltered workshop for victims of Cerebral Palsy, where they are expected to contribute to the economy of the country through their labour, at their own pace. The entire play is based on the real experience of David Freeman who has worked in a sheltered workshop in Toronto. Hence Freeman's play can be seen as a true voice representing those people who work in the workshops.

1960s and 1970s were the times that witnessed the evolution of the disability movement, which insisted on the rights of the disabled people. Set in this context, the play seems to bear theatrical witness to issues faced by the disabled that would not find political analysis and advocacy until later in the decade. The play presents six victims of Cerebral Palsy who work in the sheltered workshop. They are Tom, Pete, Sam, Jim, Michael and Thelma, who are constantly under the supervision of Miss. Saunders and Mr. Carson. Thelma is never seen on stage except for her voice, which is an epimone meaning a repeated plea "I need a priest" (Freeman 9, 23, 35, 36) Michael is a victim seriously affected by Cerebral Palsy and who can only stagger and move around and his hobby is flushing the toilets. Tom, Pete, Sam and Jim spend time in the washroom venting out their frustration in terms of teasing each other and using abusive language against the supervisors. The play ends on a note when Jim and Tom decide to quit the job and pursue their passion.

### **Biopolitics and the Concept of Homosacer**

The term biopolitics refers to the complexities of human life which is essentially biological and political. Foucault uses this term with regard to the State and the Sovereign. He argues that every human life is basically a part of the biopolitical structure, whereby the biological existence of an individual is enriched and complemented by the social and political involvements. The notion of a social body as the entity of government is developed with the introduction of biopower as a practice. Biopolitics deals with population as a political and scientific problem, as a biological issue of the exercise of power. Biopower is not directed on the individual as a subject of discipline in the various forms of

rehabilitation, normalisation and institutionalisation. It acts on the population in a preventive manner with its legitimacy originating from its preoccupation with optimising life chances, and biopower operates through not just discipline but regulation on a global scale.

Giorgio Agamben, an Italian philosopher further develops the concept of biopolitics using the image of a homosacer. He uses the terms 'zoe' and 'bios' to refer to the bare life and political life respectively. The reduction of life to 'biopolitics' is one of the main threads in Agamben's work, in his critical conception of a homosacer, reduced to 'bare life', and thus deprived of any rights. Agamben gives the example of the concentration camps in the Nazi regime stating that the camp is the space that begins to operate when the state of exception becomes the rule. The concept of the state of exception endows one person or government with the supremacy and expression of power over others protracted well beyond where the law has existed in the past. "In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference" (Agamben 40)

These ideas when studied in connection with the sheltered workshops provide an enlightenment, that the operations of the sheltered workshops is very much like an authoritarian organisation. Even though the sheltered workshops have the intention of elevating the life of disabled people to the state of 'bios', it can be noticed that they have failed to fulfil the purpose. Tom, Pete, Sam and Jim are representatives of those who work in the sheltered workshop. The sheltered workshops function like a totalitarian regime, where the supervisors assume sovereign power over the disabled people. If it was the idea of race that enabled Hitler and the Nazis to consider the Jews to be in the state of exception, it is purely the concept of sympathy and discipline that compels the disabled people in sheltered workshops to be in the state of exception.

In the play *Creeps*, the supervisors, Mr Carson and Miss Saunders take the role of the Sovereign who take upon themselves the responsibility to 'take care' of the Cerebral Palsy victims through the medium of sheltered workshop. For them, the person with disability is worth nothing, except for their biological existence; hence they claim to 'endow' them with a sense of worth through their work in the sheltered workshops. This is evident from the conversations of Sam, Pete and Tom, three Cerebral Palsy victims who talk about their supervisor:

**Sam:** You know what that stupid idiot who runs this dump says about you.

**Pete:** Yeah, I know. "Pete, if you worked in my factory, you wouldn't last a day..."

**Tom:** But since you're a *helpless cripple*, I'll let you work in my workshop..."

**Sam:** "For free!" (Freeman 11)

The sheltered workshops being like the totalitarian regime, the focus is never on the individual, but on the population. That is, sheltered workshops are created for the 'general welfare' of the disabled people. There is no emphasis on the individual or his/her interests. Every disabled person who is brought into the workshop is expected to do a set of assigned works. For example, the sheltered workshop in the play offers jobs like packing and folding boxes, making rugs, etc. there is no space for innovation or creativity. That is precisely the reason why Tom and Jim, and others feel disillusioned. An aspiring painter and an upcoming writer, Tom and Jim respectively, are not able to pursue the passion because of the lesser expectations in the workshop. Tom wants to be an artist. He paints abstract things and believes that if given a chance he can excel in his art. But he is continually discouraged. Mr. Carson comments on his decision to quit the job at the workshop in this way:

**Carson:** And what is it this time, Rembrandt? Poverty in a garret somewhere?

**Tom:** Better than poverty at the workshop.

**Carson:** What are you going to paint, nude women?

**Tom:** You son of a bitch! (Freeman 39)

Even Tom's other companions in the workshop make fun of his painting.

**Sam:** Chicken-tracks. That's what you paint Tom. Chicken-tracks.

**Tom:** I paint abstract. I know to some ignorant ass-holes it looks like chicken- tracks, but...

**Sam:** Listen Rembrandt, anything you ever tried to paint always looked like shit warmed over, so you try to cover it up calling it abstract. (Freeman 12)

Similarly, Jim is an expert in typewriting and is good at writing articles for magazines. But both of them seem to be wasting their time and energy due to the lack of opportunities in the workshop. In Tom's opinion, it has been a long time since Jim wrote anything he wanted to write. He has been writing for the sake of his employers. Their disability seems to hinder them.

The workers are politically in the state of exception. The supervisors, assuming the role of the Sovereign exercise the power of authority over them. The workers in the sheltered workshop can either oblige to the norms of the supervisors or be in the position of homosacer. The play is set in the washroom of the sheltered workshop. There are instances when Miss Saunders and Mr. Carson threaten these disabled workers to come out of the washroom and get back to their work. Only those who gratify the needs of the supervisors continue favourably; all the others express their disillusionment through the use of abusive language. They continue to be living the bare life (zoe), rather than a politically relevant life (bios). By denying the workers their need to pursue their dreams, the supervisors engage in the process of 'exclusion by inclusion' thereby excluding them from the mainstream and 'imprisoning' them in an institutionalized structure called the sheltered workshops. In this sense, Tom and Jim are homosacers, who are excluded from the mainstream, yet are forcefully included in a structure.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus, in conclusion, it can be understood that the sheltered workshops are like the concentration camps of the Nazi regime, restricting the individuality of the workers and forcing them to live a life strictly under the control/biopower of the supervisors. This kind of power relationship not only projects the disability of the body, but tends to further disable the individual's interests and talents and capabilities of production. Thus Freeman's five voices – Sam, Pete, Tom, Jim and Michael, with the unseen Thelma's disembodied cry for help, engage in a never-ending battle for their status of 'bios' in the limbo for cripples which imprisons all of them in the status of 'zoe'.

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